Creative Strategies in Social Media Marketing: An Exploratory Study of Branded Social Content and Consumer Engagement

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a content analysis of the creative strategies present in the social media content shared by a sample of top brands. The results reveal which social media channels are being used, which creative strategies/appeals are being used, and how these channels and strategies relate to consumer engagement in branded social media. Past research has suggested that brands should focus on maintaining a social presence across social channels with content that is fresh and frequent and includes incentives for consumer participation (Ling et al., 2004). This study confirmed the importance of frequent updates and incentives for participation. In addition, several creative strategies were associated with customer engagement, specifically experiential, image, and exclusivity messages. Despite the value of these creative approaches, most branded social content can be categorized as functional. © 2014 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Social media, which include online channels for sharing and participating in a variety of activities, represent an increasingly important way for brands to communicate with attractive audience segments (Murdough, 2009). Marketers are expected to increase social media advertising spending to $5 billion in 2014, up from $4.1 billion in 2013, according to eMarketer (2013). In a relatively short period of time, marketers have embraced social media marketing for a variety of marketing objectives including branding, research, customer relationship management, service, and sales promotions. Of these, most marketers value social media most for branding (eMarketer, 2013). According to the 2013 Social Media Industry Report (Stelzner, 2013), 86% of marketers believe social media channels are important components of their marketing initiatives.

Branded social campaigns provide additional touchpoints to encourage ongoing interaction between the consumer and the brand story throughout the day, which can deepen consumer–brand relationships, help marketers uncover common themes in consumer feedback, and persuade consumers to engage with online content (Murdough, 2009). Thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, and experiences from these touchpoints form a set of associations with the brand in consumer memory (Keller, 2009). Marketers have several options within the social media landscape for branding including placing paid display advertising, participating in

social networks as a brand persona, developing branded engagement opportunities for customer participation within social networks, and publishing branded content (known as content marketing or social publishing) in social channels (Tuten & Solomon, 2013). Brands may utilize social media marketing as an integrated component in a marketing communications campaign, as an ongoing corporate communications channel, and/or as a series of microcampaigns specifically designed for digital exposure.

For instance, the highly acclaimed Proctor and Gamble "Thank You Mom" campaign is an example of an integrated approach (Berkowitz, 2012). Consumers were asked to contribute stories (i.e., user-generated content) on the role of mothers in nurturing child athletes. These stories were sought out and then shared in social channels, but ultimately also became the basis for a series of commercials that aired in broadcast as well as online (Berkowitz, 2012). Dell has been widely acclaimed as a leader in the use of social media for ongoing corporate communications and customer relationship management (Quintos, 2013). Its social media presence is characterized by continuity and a focus on business-to-consumer dialogue. The timing and dialogue are important because consumers utilize social media to build social capital and contribute to their psychological well-being, since social media provides a communication route for meeting a social need. Lastly, companies such

as Guinness have had success with microcampaigns with short-term marketing objectives. An example is the Guinness Shamrock app launched in Facebook to drive attendance at St. Patrick Day Festivals sponsored by Guinness.

Though social media are now a mainstay in the portfolio of communication channels marketers utilize, little is known about how to approach the creative message aspects of branded social content in a way that maximizes psychological engagement. Psychological engagement is dependent on consumer needs, motives, and goals. Customers define the rules of brand engagement and can insulate themselves (Keller, 2009). Psychological engagement is important because consumers are not passive recipients of information; they are participants (Schmitt, 2012).

To date, most guidance has been prescriptive with a focus on industry case studies (e.g., Furlow, 2011). Academic literature, discussed later in this paper, has focused heavily on the content prevalent in branded social content (e.g., Cho & Huh, 2010; Parsons, 2013) and on the motives and characteristics of consumer participation in social channels (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011; Kunz & Hackworth, 2011; Wattanasupachoke, 2011). Brand managers are left with advice on presence, frequency, dialogue, and freshness: which channels to be present in, how often to post, the importance of dialogue, and the need for fresh content.

Industry publications tout the need for branded social content to be interactive and experiential (Stelzner, 2013), but Hutton and Fosdick (2011) found that the top three social activities online are passive in nature, simply involving content consumption. Perhaps the hesitation to design interactive social content is due to concerns that interactivity could be too taxing, increasing the cognitive burden of processing a brand's message in an environment where the consumer is trying to protect cognitive resources. From a figure-ground perspective, the interaction or conversation tends to be in the foreground, while the brand content that prompts conversation remains in the background (Pask, 1976), which may result in different processing of brand messages in a social media environment.

In addition to the interactive aspect, social media has an interpersonal aspect, so normative and informational influences may work for, or against, the brand, depending on consumer engagement (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Consumers strategically choose the brands they will discuss in online communications to construct positive self-images (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Brand marketers care about these brand choices because identity theory suggests that a brand commitment connects an individual to stable set of self-meanings, which produces consistent lines of activities, such as purchase behavior (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). Self-expansion theory suggests consumers communicate with and about brands due to overlapping identities and parasocial relationships with the brands. Brands can suffer if consumers feel the relationship is one-sided or the brand does something that is not consistent with the consumer's identity (Huang & Mitchell, 2014). Information about relationship brands is processed at a higher level of abstraction and relationship brands that violate norms are prone to greater punishment from consumers (Schmitt, 2012). How should brands design social media messages to consider the effects of consumer identity and social cognition on consumer responses?

Unfortunately, although marketers receive advice regarding the execution of message delivery in social media, they receive little guidance on how different message strategies will affect processing, engagement, and, ultimately, important brand outcomes such as brand equity and loyalty. Can the creative message strategies utilized in advertising translate to branded social content? Existing literature suggests activity on social networks must be user-centered vs. message centered, so how can a brand effectively get its message across to the consumer while gratifying the consumer's needs (Chi, 2011)? Marketers will benefit from understanding whether the creative appeals common in traditional advertising campaigns apply to branding in social media and, if so, what message strategies are most effective in achieving consumer engagement.

To begin to address this gap in the literature, an exploratory study of the use of creative strategies in brand-sponsored social media efforts was conducted. Using a sample of global brands ranked in brand equity and brands recognized for excellence in social media engagement, branded social content was analyzed in order to answer the following questions:

- Which social media channels are being used by top brands that have been recognized for their social media efforts?
- Which types of message appeals are they using in their social media efforts?
- How do the tools, strategies, and appeals each company is using relate to customer engagement with social media?

The manuscript aims to answer each of these questions. Doing so, it contributes to the literature on creative strategies by exploring relationships between the use of different types of message appeals and consumer engagement in the context of social media. The rest of the paper is structured to include a review of relevant literature, methods, and findings. Finally, the paper concludes with directions for future research.

Branding with Social Media

Social media may serve as a channel for many marketing activities including customer relationship management, customer service, buyer research, lead generation, sales promotion delivery channel, paid advertising channel, and branding. Regardless of the goal, information about the brand must be relevant to the consumer if you want the consumer to engage with a brand in self-relevant ways (Schmitt, 2012). As noted, marketers

categorize social media as a branding channel first and foremost (eMarketer, 2013). As such, branded social media activities can be used to increase brand awareness and brand liking, promote customer engagement and loyalty, inspire consumer word-of-mouth communication about the brand, and potentially drive traffic to brand locations on and offline. These branded social activities rely on social networks and may involve activities such as ongoing business-to-consumer dialogue, socially published branded content (e.g., white papers), engagement experiences (e.g., Office Max's Elf Yourself), and the social presence and participation of a brand persona (e.g., Travelocity's Traveling Gnome).

The 2013 Social Media Industry Report noted that marketers may seek increased opportunities to expose target audiences to the brand message, increased traffic to brand Web sites, improved search rankings, and more loyalty among customers (Stelzner, 2013). Customer engagement is another common objective; a study in 2012 found that 78% of marketers report using social media to enhance customer engagement. Customer engagement is behavior-based, extends beyond purchase, and has a brand or firm focus (Doorn et al., 2010). Customers may engage along five characteristics including valence (value), form (type of resources utilized), scope (temporal and geographic), impact, and customer goals for engagement. (For a thorough review of the concept of customer engagement, the reader is encouraged to see Doorn et al., 2010.)

Marketers must define their own customer engagement behaviors (CEBs). In social media, engaged consumers participate and share. Participation may be passive involving simply consuming the social content or active including such behaviors as submitting consumer-generated stories (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011). Social media outlets provide a context for new kinds of identity performance, and brands are a part of the performance (Merchant, 2006). Thus, consumers may share their own opinions and/or share the branded content with their network. Consumer response to social media is typically measured by noting whether the consumer links, bookmarks, blogs, refers others, clicks, friends, connects, subscribes, submits an inquiry or idea, and/or buys the brand (Falls, 2010).

Among these consumer behaviors, those that result in a brand mention shared to the person's network, called influence impressions, are among the most desirable (Li & Bernoff, 2008). Influence impressions are simply word-of-mouth communication, a form of earned media, shared via social channels. The earned media in the form of word-of-mouth communication that can accrue to brands using social media marketing represent a valuable outcome for brands. The average network size among social users, the ease of spreading information within and across social networks, and the credibility associated with information shared peer-to-peer contribute to the perceived value of social word-of-mouth communication (Kerr, Mortimer, Dickinson, & Waller, 2012; Porter & Golan, 2006; Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). Branded social content can be used

like advertising to influence consumer brand attitudes and also provides consumers with content to share with their own networks. In other words, good content may trigger the audience to engage.

Developing Effective Creative Social Content

Brands may be floundering in digital space because the number and lack of familiarity of each of these options make it challenging to develop creative that would be effective in social media environments (Sheehan & Morrison, 2009; Wilson, Guinan, Parise, & Weinberg, 2011). From their analysis of strategies across 1100 companies and interviews with 70 executives who managed social media, Wilson and his colleagues (2011) identified a trend where some social media efforts become an experimental free-for-all that rarely result in the desired outcome. Yet, research such as that from Martin and Todorov (2010) suggested brand marketers think about developing social media based engagement opportunities that keep customers connected to a brand story throughout the day. Developing branded social content that accomplishes these objectives can be difficult. Sheehan and Morrison (2009) identified four creativity challenges that brand marketers face: (1) the challenge to effectively use social media, (2) the challenge to grow marketers with creative vision, (3) the challenge to involve consumers in telling their own stories, and (4) the challenge to reinvent the mass media model. They described engagement as a consumer relationship that recognizes that people are inherently social and look to create and maintain relations not only with other people, but also with brands. So, message strategies may not only aim to selectively combine information that was previously considered unrelated, but also help make innovative connections and relationship between individuals. When brand marketers adopt an engagement perspective, the brand's messaging shifts from a transactional perspective to an interactional perspective where the brand becomes a part of the consumer's own identity. Sheehan and Morrison (2009) point to the need for creativity in the development of brand messages that can be effectively delivered in social as well as traditional media while encouraging consumer engagement in order to produce desired brand outcomes.

In 2009, Altimeter Group, a leading consultancy in digital media, and Wetpaint, a social content hosting company, sought to address this gap with a study entitled *Engagementdb: Ranking the Top 100 Brands* (2009). Using the most valuable brands listed in the Business Week/Interbrand Best Global Brands report on global brand equity, the *Engagementdb* study found that branded social activity was positively correlated with financial performance. Its measure of engagement scored brands on marketer activities, specifically publishing content, building a network of friends, conversing within networks, and updating brand profiles across

multiple social media channels including social networks, blogs, branded communities, and social publishing sites (e.g., YouTube).

Brands were categorized into one of four categories based on the number of social channels used and engagement scores. The scope of social media channels was limited to blogs, branded social networks/communities, content distribution to other sites (e.g., ShareThis), discussion forums, external social network presence (e.g., Facebook), photo sites (e.g., Instagram), innovation hubs, ratings and reviews, Twitter, and YouTube. Executive involvement was also counted as participation in a channel. Engagement was captured using 40 attributes that counted not only participation in these channels but also how the brands participated.

Companies generally received full credit for engagement if corporate resources were allocated to managing an ongoing presence and the brand actively participated with the channel. Companies received partial credit if consumers or affiliates developed or managed the channels. A quantitative score was assigned to each brand based on the breadth and depth of its investment in social media channels, and the brands were categorized in four quadrants: *mavens* (many channels, high engagement); *butterflies* (many channels, low engagement); *selectives* (fewer channels, high engagement); and *wallflowers* (fewer channels, low engagement).

Mavens, the most engaged brands, were very active in more than seven social media channels as part of a robust strategy that included a dedicated team focused on social media and makes social media a core part of the market strategy. *Butterflies* used seven or more social media channels but lacked engagement, possibly due to a lack of resources for ongoing brand participation across social channels. *Selectives* used six or fewer channels but engaged customers deeply in those channels. *Wallflowers* used six or fewer channels and were not active on those channels, earning below-average engagement scores. The final report ranked the top 100 brands based on their engagement scores and showed evidence that social engagement scores correlated with financial performance.

The *Engagementdb* report is valuable in providing a lens through which to consider the relevance of social media marketing for brand management, particularly as it relates to financial measures of success. However, as developed, the results of the report are limited. First, the *Engagementdb* report did not assess the relationship between brand social engagement and brand equity valuations. Second, because the report viewed engagement from the brand marketer's perspective instead of capturing and valuing the consumer activities that result from that engagement, it is not clear whether socially active brands were successfully generating brand benefits including increased awareness, liking, word-of-mouth communication, and loyalty. Third, the report did not investigate the nature of the brand messages. The report suggests that high levels of brand activity across several social channels correlated with financial performance but provided no insight into the creative strategies that may enhance engagement or other desired brand outcomes.

The *Engagementdb* report is certainly not the only report that seeks to provide prescriptive guidance for brand marketers, but it is representative of the prevalence of information focused on brand presence and activity over content characteristics including creative strategy. This study seeks to address this gap. There is some value to communicating with target audiences in social spaces. How best can brands create engaging branded social messages?

Creative Strategies for Branded Content

Creative strategies are the executional factors and message strategies used to bridge the gap between what the marketer wants to say and what the consumer needs to hear. Creative strategy encompasses both message content and execution and includes the notion of designing communications in a way that increases the likelihood it can produce the desired effects in the target audience (Laskey, Day, & Crask, 1989). Brand marketers have a high level of interest in creative strategies because of their importance to advertising results. Creative strategies can enhance the receiver's motivation, opportunity, and/or ability to process information from an ad (MacInnis, Moorman, & Jaworski, 1991). Identifying creative strategies aids practitioners in identifying options and comparing their effectiveness.

Consequently, researchers have proposed typologies of message strategies (e.g., Frazer, 1983; Laskey, Day, & Crask, 1989) and executional factors (Johar & Sirgy, 1991). A plethora of studies have evaluated the psychological and brand outcomes associated with various creative appeals (Schmitt, 2012). A thorough review of the vast literature on creative strategies is beyond the scope of this paper; but a basic description of creative message strategies in branded communications is introduced as a foundation. Content analyses of communications have also considered source effects in addition to message content; at this point, source effects will be considered in later work (Ang & Low, 2000).

At the simplest level, creative strategies can be distinguished as primarily emotional/transformational or primarily functional/informational (Aaker & Norris, 1982). Beyond distinguishing the emphasis on rational information vs. emotion, creative strategies can focus on benefits that are unique to the brand (unique selling proposition), superior for the brand (preemptive, comparative), or undifferentiated in the product class (generic). They can focus on matching the brand to consumer aspirations (image), insights and experiences (resonance, experiential), and feelings (emotional including love, sexual desire, fear, guilt, and joy/humor). Functional messages are thought to be processed rationally while transformational messages appeal to the psychological characteristics of the target audience (Laskey, Day, & Crask, 1989). Beyond this

basic categorization found in the literature, researchers have sought to identify under what circumstances certain strategies may be more effective than others.

For example, Johar and Sirgy (1991) suggested image appeals are more effective when the product being promoted is value-expressive for the target consumer, while functional appeals are more effective when the product is utilitarian. Several studies, relying upon theoretical models including the elaboration likelihood model have highlighted the wisdom of matching functional messages to high-involvement consumers and transformational messages to low-involvement consumers (Areni, 2003). Involvement is a person's perceived relevance of the object in question based on inherent needs, values, and interests (Zaichkowsky, 1985, p. 342).

Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) explained that involvement encompasses both cognitive engagement as well as orientation reaction in their explanation of consumer consumption patterns. Cognitive engagement is associated with logical, problem-oriented situations while orientation reaction is primarily emotional. This distinction in involvement types aligns with the basic categorization of creative messages as functional or transformational. Further, this relationship between involvement and creative approach has been found online. McMillan, Hwang, and Lee (2003) compared Web sites based on their use of informational vs. transformational creative strategies and the availability of features. They noted that information-based strategies may be best for high-involvement customers, while varying sizes and animation are more effective with low-involvement consumers. This is also consistent with selective attention theory, which suggests consumers limit the expenditure of cognitive resources, including attention, according to their needs.

Using use and gratification theory (Katz, 1959), Jahn and Kunz (2012) studied consumer participation in brand profile pages on Facebook and found that functional and hedonic contents were drivers of participation. Uses and gratification theory takes a functionalist perspective on mass media communication processing and explains that people's needs for communications are oriented to content, relationships, and self (Luo, 2002). Content refers to the information delivered by the media; content can be either functional or hedonic. In the study of participation in brand profile pages, content drove fan page usage. Relationship-orientation refers to the fulfillment of social interaction provided by the media. Self-orientation refers to the specific needs of the individual in question (Jahn & Kunz, 2012). The most important and robust motivators tend to be entertainment (need for escapism, hedonism, aesthetic enjoyment, emotion); informativeness (need for resources and helpful information); and irritation (a demotivator, so consumers need to avoid distractions, anxiety, and things that dilute human experiences) (Luo, 2002).

Peluchette and Karl (2009) found that Facebook users use their profiles and postings to consciously portray images about themselves. Sinha, Ahuja, and Medury (2011) found that when consumer's knowledge about a brand increases (through social media) so does the emotional attachment to the brand regardless of whether content of the brand's social communications was functional or emotional in nature. In a content analysis of viral ads online, Golan and Zaidner (2008) used Taylor's six-segment message strategy wheel to categorize the creative strategies used in the ads and found that most ads were based on humor and sexuality.

In terms of engagement experiences, brands may invite consumers to experience branded content, called branded entertainment, in the context of social networks, a virtual world or social game. Using play theory as a conceptual basis, Zhang (2010) conducted an exploratory content analysis of branded entertainment content features in Facebook. He found that 70% of brands utilized branded entertainment on Facebook and that traditional play themes found in entertainment were present in branded entertainment on Facebook.

Some research suggests that branded entertainment, particularly advergames and other opt-in interactive experiences, provide uninterrupted sensory immersion that can benefit the brand by extending the time the consumer spends with the brand message (Nelson, Keum, & Yaros, 2004). Dahl, Eagle, and Baez (2009) described advergames as electronic games with embedded commercial messages that aim to form an emotional connection between the game and brand featured within it. Achievements in advergames, often represented by trophies or badges, can provide affirmation, group identification, and help shape user activities (Antin & Churchill, 2011).

In addition, because the consumer opts in for the entertainment value of the game, they are often more willing to tolerate the advertising content than they would be with an uninvited pop-up ad, as found by Dahl, Eagle, and Baez (2009). If the consumer is caught up in the flow of the game, his/her positive response to the game can have a halo effect on the advertiser and help provide a frame for the message (Wang & Calder, 2009). Mabry and Porter (2010) studied the effectiveness of a promotional contest in MySpace compared to a branded Web site at driving intent to purchase. They found that the brand Web site was more effective than the social promotion but noted that the results suggested a greater intent to purchase would have been achieved by a campaign that used both a social promotion and a branded Web site.

Naylor, Lamberton, and West (2012) identified how mere virtual presence and the characteristics of brand supporters on social networks could affect evaluations of unfamiliar brands. Their research lends support to the use of brand personas to meet objectives for improving consumer brand awareness and brand evaluations. Cho and Huh (2010) analyzed the content of corporate blogs and found that corporate blogs sought to establish content that was easy to use, frequent, social, and linked to other relevant content.

Chandy, Tellis, MacInnis, and Thaivanich (2001) proposed that ad cues can have different effects on consumer behavior depending on whether the market is new or old. Their study found an improved effectiveness of comparative strategies in new markets over old markets while emotional messages performed better in old markets rather than new ones. Many factors including target audience characteristics, creative execution, market characteristics, and environmental trends can influence the effectiveness of specific creative strategies.

Stewart and Koslow (1989) noted that no single executional factor accounted for more than a small percentage of variance in the measures of all of the desirable outcomes for advertisements. Having a brand differentiating message influenced persuasion and recall, but it did not affect comprehension. It takes a creative combination of many elements to turn advertising into a persuasive art form. It may also take a creative combination of many types of media. Social media can prime a consumer's interest for an advertising message in another medium, or vice versa. Having multiple sources of the same message can also improve message credibility and confidence in the advertised product (Voorveld, Niejens, & Smit, 2010). What combination of these elements are advertisers using online? While Stewart and Koslow (1989) reminded marketers that there is no magic formula for establishing creative message strategy, there is value in understanding the options and how those options may influence consumer engagement and other attitudes.

METHODS

To address the research questions, the study utilized a content analysis to gain information on the content of social media branding efforts. This method has proven useful in the past for understanding the content of print ads, television commercials, product placement, outdoor advertising, and Web sites (e.g., Calcott & Lee, 1994; Dahl, Eagle, & Baez, 2009; McQuarrie & Phillips, 2008; Turley & Kelley, 1997). Although content analysis does not capture the effectiveness of creative strategies across different media, it is useful to identify the social media channels and strategies used by top brands.

Sample

As the objective of the study was to examine social media usage by top brands recognized for their social media efforts, a sample of content from select brands on the top 100 brands in brand equity list identified in Interbrand's Best Global Brands valuation study was used. From this list of 100 brands, brands recognized for social media excellence by either the *Engagementdb* report described earlier (2009) or the Forrester Groundswell Awards (Forrester, 2009) were selected. Eighteen brands in the Best Global Brands

study were identified as *mavens* in the *Engagementdb* report (2009). Ten brands were recognized as finalists or winners in the Forrester Groundswell Awards (Forrester, 2009) for their social media efforts. The 10 brands recognized by Forrester were also part of the *Engagementdb* report and included three *mavens* from the original list, five *butterflies*, two selective brands, and three *wallflowers*. The sample used in the content analysis included social media content associated with 28 brands.

The social media content for each brand was captured on one day between June 2010 and August 2010. The content captured included one week of Facebook/MySpace posts, one week of tweets, one week of content from blogs and forums, and all video and photo content. Because social media is voraciously dynamic, the one week of content from Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, forums, and blogs was captured using screenshots so a static sample would be available for coding by two independent judges. The final sample of content included 446 pages of Facebook content, 329 pages of Twitter content from 97 Twitter names, and content from 21 photosharing accounts, 49 blogs, 17 forums, content from four MySpace pages, 28 microsites, 27 games, 39 video channels, which yielded 1350 8 ½ × 11 sized pages of content.

Code Sheet Development

Beginning with the list of execution and message appeal strategies from the existing literature, one of the authors reviewed the social media efforts of the top brands (using site reviews, mashups, popular press, and white papers) to identify the use of different creative strategies in the social media environment. The creative strategies that were observed related to the existing literature regarding message strategies (e.g., Calcott & Lee, 1994; Heiser, Sierra, & Torres 2008; Johar & Sirgy, 1991; Laskey, Day, & Crask, 1989; Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999; Thorson & Rodgers, 2006), sales promotions (Mabry & Porter, 2010; Mulhern & Leone, 2000; Shi, Cheung, & Prendergast, 2005), and user-generated content (Bian, Liu, Agichtein & Zha, 2008; Mishne & Glance, 2006). The identified message strategies, sales promotions, and user-generated content uses were used to code the content in the subsequent content analysis.

A code sheet was developed for use in recording the creative message strategies used in the branded content and the social media channels used to distribute content and interact with consumers. Table 1 identifies the creative strategies measured in the content analysis and the definitions used to identify the presence or absence of the creative strategy. Social media channels were also identified on the code sheet, including blog; microblog (e.g., Twitter); social network (e.g., Facebook, MySpace); microsite (at a separate Web address with instructions to forward to a friend); video sharing (e.g., on YouTube, Facebook, own

Table 1. Creative Strategies.

Message Strategies	
Integrated content	If they are leveraging a traditional media campaign, this will be one.
	If it is unique content for the social media, this is zero.
Interactivity	In terms of the overall campaign, judge its overall level of "interactivity"—the extent to which consumers can participate and engage and be active with the campaign?
	1 = very little, 2 = somewhat, 3 = moderate, 4 = very, 5 = extremely interactive.
Functional appeal	Utility or functionality of the product/service.
Emotional appeal	Psychological/social needs—how it will make them feel.
Experiential appeal	How they will experience sight, sound, taste, touch, smells.
Unique selling proposition	How product/service is different from others.
Comparative	Do they compare their products to a competitor(s)? If so, is it direct comparison (e.g., Tylenol vs. Excedrin) or indirect (us vs. the leading pain reliever)—1 = direct, 2 = indirect, 0 = neither.
Resonance	An echoing between the image and words (e.g., buried treasure).
User image	Examples: "you deserve it" "you're worth it."
Social cause	Examples: Avon aligning with breast cancer awareness, Kodak Cares aligning with Kodak with environmental efforts.
Exclusivity	Invitation only—only some people qualify—limited time—limited quantity
Animation	Motion; often from a cartoon or graphic image.
Spokescharacter/spokesperson	Does the same individual/character show up in the campaign? Is it a celebrity? A typical person? A spokescharacter (e.g., Tony the Tiger)?

Sales Promotions	
Discounts or price offs	Do they offer deals or discounts in exchange for something (e.g., signing up/participation)?
Contest	Do they provide consumers with the ability to enter a contest or sweepstakes?

User-Generated Content	
Invitation to submit content	This can be comments, captions, videos, pictures. If yes, via video? Photos? Story? Answers? Captions? Other?
Incentives to submit content	If yes, is the sharing part of a contest? Do they get a reward or some kind of recognition?
Ability to rank/vote on content from others	Do other people get to help select the content choice or comment on content generated by other users?
Ability to interact with or comment on content	This refers to any aspect of the campaign—can they post on Facebook, give feedback on forums, etc.?

site); photo sharing (e.g., Flickr, Shutterfly, Facebook, own site); audio sharing (e.g., podcasts); social bookmarking service or sharing application (e.g., Google, StumbleUpon); mobile apps (e.g., downloadable apps for iPhone/Droid); virtual world (e.g., Second Life); social games (multiplayer advergames); wiki (user-generated content organized around a topic or definition that is different from a question/answer forum because users can update information); and discussion forums.

Coder Training and Reliability

Two coders were trained to analyze the content collected from the 28 brands. Each coder received a coding worksheet and examples of each specified categories. Each coder sat with one of the authors, who explained the coding worksheet, went through the specified categories, and walked through the coding for a brand that was not included in the final collection of 28 brands. Then each coder coded one brand of the 28 brands on his own and the results were compared. Ambiguities were addressed via discussion.

Both coders coded all of the content. Intercoder reliability was calculated based on percentage of agreement. Intercoder reliability was 88.17%, with 98.2% reliability for the ratings on the presence or absence of each type of social media and 88% reliability for the coding of creative strategies. Coding discrepancies were resolved by one of the authors.

Table 2. Social Media Channel Usage.

Channel	Number of Brands (out of 28)	Percentage of 28 Brands (%)
Microblog	27	96.43
Social networking	27	96.43
Microsite	27	96.43
Video sharing	26	92.86
Discussion forums	24	85.71
Social bookmarking	20	71.43
Photo sharing	18	64.29
Mobile apps	11	39.29
Audio sharing	10	35.71
Wikis	8	28.57
Social games	5	17.86
Virtual world	4	14.29

Table 3. Message Strategy Usage.

Strategy	Number of Brands (out of 28)	Percentage of 28 Brands (%)
Functional appeal	25	89.29
Resonance	19	67.86
Experiential appeal	16	57.14
Emotional appeal	12	42.86
Unique selling proposition	11	39.29
Social cause	9	32.14
Exclusivity	8	28.57
Animation	8	28.57
Comparative appeal	7	25.00
Direct comparison	3	10.71
Indirect comparison	4	14.29
Spokespeople	7	25.00
Typical people	2	7.14
Celebrities	5	17.86
Spokescharacter	1	3.57

RESULTS

Top Brands' Social Media Channel Usage

In the second stage of the analysis, the first aspect each coder reviewed was the presence or absence of social media channel use. Coders identified whether each brand had at least one blog, microblog, external social network, microsite, video sharing, photo sharing, audio sharing, social bookmarking, mobile apps, virtual worlds, social games, wikis, and discussion forums. Table 2 ranks each of these channels from most frequently used to least frequently used, and shows the numbers and percentage of the 28 brands that utilized each channel.

As shown in Table 2, the most commonly used channels were social networks (27/28), microblogs (27/28), and microsites, followed by blogs (26/28) and video sharing (26/28). The favored social network was Facebook (27/28). The least frequently used channels were virtual worlds (4/28), social games (5/28), and wikis (8/28). It should be noted that in some cases, virtual worlds and wikis may be utilized for internal communications and would not be observed in external branding efforts.

The coders were also asked to observe the number of Twitter followers, tweets, and Facebook fans, where applicable. The number of followers, tweets, and fans was averaged across the 28 brands (where brands without accounts received an input of zero). On average, the 28 brands had 207,070 followers, 4872 tweets in the past week, and 1.802+ million Facebook fans.

Top Brands' Social Creative Strategies

Next, coders were asked to categorize the creative strategies used for each brand. Coders were asked to identify whether the campaign was integrated with offline efforts, to rate the interactivity, and to observe whether or not the social media channels included functional appeals, emotional appeals, experiential appeals, a unique selling proposition, comparative appeals, resonance, exclusivity appeals, social causes, animation, and spokespeople or spokescharacters. They were also asked to observe whether and how user-generated content and sales promotions were used.

While 18 of 28 of the brands developed unique content for their social media channels, the remaining 10 brands leveraged their existing campaigns on the social media channels. Most of the brands (27/28) were given interactivity ratings that were greater than one, with an average interactivity rating of 3.34 (SD = 0.76) across the 28 brands. The frequency of each type of remaining message strategy is listed in Table 3, sorted by frequency of use across the 28 brands. The most commonly used appeals were functional appeals (25/28) and resonance (19/28), while the least commonly used appeals were comparative (7/28) and spokespeople (7/28). Only one brand used a spokescharacter.

For user generated content, 26/28 brands invited users to share content, and 14 of the brands gave consumers and incentive for sharing. In the sales promotion category, contests were used by twice as many brands (14) as discounts (7). Finally, 10 of 28 brands gave consumers the opportunity to vote or provide feedback about the content of others.

Creative Strategies and Social Media Engagement

In addition to providing information about the frequency of channel and creative strategy usage, the study explored how the channel and creative strategy usage related to social media engagement. Therefore, the correlations between the coded metrics and the metrics for social popularity (number of Twitter followers and Facebook fans), social influence (in this case, using *Klout* score from www.klout.com as the measure), and the Engagement Score (from *Engagementdb*) were analyzed. The significant correlations are shown in bold in Table 4.

Table 4. Correlations between Channel and Creative Strategy Use and Social Media Engagement Metrics.

	Number of people following	Facebook Fans	*Klout* Score	Followers	Engagement Score
Tweets	**r = 0.372** 0.050	n.s.	**r = 0.387** 0.042	**r = 0.398** 0.036	n.s.
Number of channels	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	**r = 0.478** 0.01	**r = 0.485** < .001
Resonance	**r = 0.387** 0.042	n.s.	**r = 0.437** 0.02	n.s.	n.s.
Animation	n.s.	n.s.	**r = .547** 0.003	n.s.	n.s.
User image appeal	n.s.	**r = 0.406** 0.032	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Exclusivity appeals	n.s.	**r = 0.449** 0.016	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Functional appeals	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.
Experiential appeals	n.s.	n.s.	**r = 0.449** 0.017	n.s.	**r = 0.479** 0.01
Emotional appeals	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	**r = –0.448** 0.017
Social cause	n.s.	n.s.	**r = 0.393** 0.039	n.s.	n.s.
Incentive to share content	**r = 0.425** 0.024	**r = 0.453** 0.016	**r = 0.544** 0.003	n.s.	**r = 0.378** 0.048

Brands that issued the most tweets in the one week period also had the highest number of people following them, the highest number of followers, and the highest *Klout* scores on Twitter. Further, brands that used the most social media channels had more followers and higher engagement scores. The higher engagement score is not surprising since engagement scores factored in the number of social media channels used. However, the pattern indicates there may be a relationship between the frequency and modality of outreach efforts and consumer willingness to engage as a microblog follower.

The use of user-image appeals and exclusivity appeals had significant correlations with the number of Facebook fans, while resonance, animation, experiential appeals, and connections with social causes had significant correlations with a brand's *Klout* score. Although experiential appeals also had a significant positive relationship with the brand's engagement score, the relationship between emotional appeals and the brand's engagement score was negative. This may suggest some of the brands with high engagement scores do not use emotional appeals. In terms of user-generated content, brands that offered an incentive for participation had more consumers following them on Twitter and fans, as well as higher *Klout* scores and Engagement Scores.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to address three key questions. First, which social media tools are being used by top brands that have been recognized for their social media efforts? Second, which types of message appeals are they using in their social media efforts? Third, how do the tools, strategies, and appeals each company is using relate to customer engagement with social media?

The brands featured in this study focused on some social media channels more so than others. Microblogs (e.g., Twitter), social networks (e.g., Facebook), and socialized microsites (e.g., Doritos Crash the Superbowl) were the most utilized tools followed closely by video sharing (e.g., YouTube posts) and discussion forums. Other forms such as social bookmarks, photosharing, mobile applications, and social games were less used.

Given that these are brands recognized for engagement, what does this tell us about social media marketing channels? When developing marketing communications plans, brands go where the consumers are—both in terms of message strategy and media planning. In the case of social media, brands may gravitate toward microblogs, social networks, microsites, and video sharing sites because consumer reach is higher for those channels than for others. This is a logical rationale for the finding. However, it also suggests that clutter, and psychological interference, may already be present among social media channels just as it is in other marketing communications media (Rumbo, 2002). Another possible explanation is the ease of use of the channel and/or ability to repurpose existing brand assets in the channel. For instance, microblogs require attention but the autoposting of short bursts of text is a relatively easy way for brands to be involved in social media. Social networks, likewise, are likely to have a high perceived ease of use. However, the development of games,

mobile apps, and podcasts may be beyond a brand's standard development of branded content. Another explanation is that marketers do not want to develop content that imposes a high cognitive burden on the consumer.

To what extent are brands using accepted creative message strategies in their social media communications? The findings suggest that functional appeals are the most commonly used appeal in social media, followed by resonance and experiential appeals. Because of the experiential, participatory nature of social media, it is somewhat surprising that functional and resonance appeals were used by more brands than the experiential appeal. One possible explanation is brand marketers do not want alienate consumers, especially consumers who feel they are in relationships with the brand. So, brand marketers may stick with message strategies that will be processed at a high level of abstraction by the consumers (Schmitt, 2012).

Interestingly, the results suggest that brands are using multiple appeals as they share content with target audiences in social media. While an advertising campaign may emphasize a brand's unique selling proposition consistently throughout the campaign, when it comes to social media, these brands appear to be utilizing a variety of messages strategies. Typically, brands are encouraged to speak with one integrated voice in a manner consistent with its positioning statement. Future research may investigate whether a portfolio of message appeals can stay consistent with a single positioning statement and if not, what is the impact on the brand's equity and image?

Social media is dependent upon content from journalistic sources, brands, and users. This is evident in the high number of brands that issued calls for action to users to share content and those that also incentivized consumers to submit content. Brands are often times warned that consumers "friend" or follow brands in order to qualify for discounts and coupons. However, this study found that the top brands are relying more heavily on contests than on discounts. It is possible that underperforming brands are more prevalent users of discounts in social media channels. Marketers that use contests should recognize that goals, such as earning enough points for a contest entry, are most effective when they are attainable and challenging (Antin & Churchill, 2011).

Are social media channels and message appeals affecting aspects of performance for the brands? Common metrics cited for social media marketing campaigns include number of Facebook fans, number of Twitter followers, and *Klout* scores. The channels and appeals used are related to some aspects of performance. Using a large number of channels was related only to a brand's engagement score. This is not surprising given that channel breadth was a consideration in the development of the score.

It is interesting to note that there were only three message appeals related to performance on Facebook: image appeal, exclusivity appeal, and incentives. Could

Facebook have a culture focused on image and exclusivity that fits well with a brand's use of these appeals? In terms of *Klout* scores, a measure of overall influence in social media, resonance, animation, experiential appeals, social causes, and incentives were all related to performance. This may be related to the interactivity associated with social media campaigns. Consumers participate in the campaigns as active members—is participation more likely or easier when campaigns are based on these appeals? Finally, an interesting point is to note that functional appeals, the appeal used by the most brands across their social media channels, were not related to any of the measures of social media performance used in the study. Use and gratifications theory suggests social media participants are likely to desire entertainment and informativeness, but perhaps entertainment is a stronger motivator of engagement with top brands than informativeness (Luo, 2002). Brands may need to focus on other types of messages in social media if they wish to see better performance.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The review of what the top brand marketers are doing in social media reflects their understanding of how consumers perceive and make judgments about brands (Schmitt, 2012). As such, this study sheds light on the creative aspects of developing social media marketing communication messages and on the effect of these creative considerations on a few key social media performance measures. Different levels of consumer engagement in social media channels and messages depend on consumer needs, motives, goals, and consumer interpersonal relationships with brands. Therefore, there are many opportunities for future research in the context of social media. One limitation of the current study the reliance on two lists that identified the brands performing the best in social media channels—the *maven*s in the *Engagementdb* report and the list of winners in Forrester's Groundswell Awards program. Thousands of brands are using social media to communicate with customers and this study does not incorporate most of them or even a representative sample of them. Future research may include a content analysis of a random sample of branded social media efforts.

Further, social media content expands exponentially each day and to manage the sheer volume of data (tweets, Facebook updates, comments, and so on), data collection was limited to content produced during a specific time frame. "Freeze frames" were taken of these periods of time. The brands studied may have behaved differently in social media channels prior to and since the data collection period. A second data collection at a different time point would be beneficial to learn how strategies changed over time.

Klout scores are not universally accepted, so an alternative metric could have been used in the analysis. Finally, there are aspects not addressed, including whether the brands' social media message

strategies were consistent with other marketing communication messages, other forms of performance, and consumer attitudes toward the message appeals. Studying social content using the elaboration likelihood model following Areni's (2003) approach or uses and gratification theory may help to reveal why some creative strategies are more effective than others. Researching how branded social content influences the formation of brand schemas (McDaniel, 1999) would have valuable implications for social media marketers. Another option is to study the components of creativity (novelty, meaningfulness, and emotion) present within social content rather than types of creative appeals (Ang & Low, 2000). These represent future streams of research.

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